Introduction: Current issues in psychological humor research

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In 1972 Jeffrey Goldstein and Paul McGhee published their very influential *Psychology of Humor*. In his foreword to the book, Hans-Jürgen Eysenck (1972) called this volume a "milestone in the development of the experimental study of humor." But, he cautioned, "a milestone merely marks out the beginning of a long journey!" We have been on this journey now for more than 20 years, having passed other milestones in the form of published volumes and research articles, the beginning of conferences on humor and laughter, the foundation of the International Society for Humor Studies (I.S.H.S.), and the publication of this journal which is devoted exclusively to humor research.

Much has changed since Goldstein and McGhee's book appeared. Humor has become a more established field of psychological inquiry. An apparent change is, for example, the increasing exchange with other fields within psychology. Humor is used by scholars in neighboring fields as well, such as researchers into emotion who use humor to elicit spontaneous smiles. In addition, the role of humor and laughter in fields like the psychology of health, coping, counseling, and advertising is beginning to attract researchers in these fields. Moreover, humor research is beginning to make use of methodological and theoretical advances in other fields of psychology.

There is also a change in the quantity of psychological humor research. This can be demonstrated by counting the entries in the *Psychological Abstracts (PA)* relating to humor. Around 1970 there were approximately 25 articles per year related to humor listed in the *PA*. This number increased to nearly 40 around 1980, and by the end of the 1980s there were approximately 75 humor research based journal articles published annually. While there now might be three times as many humor articles published each year as there were in 1970, the total number of articles

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indexed by *PA* has only increased to less than double size in the same time span. Thus, within psychology a real increase in interest in humor research can be diagnosed; the enhanced productivity is not merely the effect of a generally raised number of publications in psychology. Notwithstanding, the proportion of humor studies of all articles indexed by *PA* is still relatively low. Over the last two decades, only one or two out of 1000 articles related to humor. By comparison, in 1990, there were nearly twice as many articles listed under depression and five times as many under anxiety.

Until 1970, *humor* was not included in *PA* as its own key word; research pertinent to humor was subsumed under the key words *emotion*, *language*, and *literature*. Today the relevant articles have to be extracted from several sources. *The Thesaurus of Psychological Index Terms* (APA 1985) lists five key words: *humor*, *jokes*, *cartoons*, *smiling*, and *laughing*. The number of articles listed in the *PA* gives, of course, only the lower bound of the productivity of humor research in psychology. Books, book chapters, and conference proceedings have not been included. Also, not all journals have been covered and not all languages represented. Until recently, even *HUMOR* was not indexed. It seems safe to assume that the number of psychological publications on humor is well beyond 100 a year.

The papers

This special issue of *HUMOR* is entitled "Current issues in psychological humor research" and contains six contributions. Thus, it can not be expected to be representative of today's humor research in psychology. Nevertheless, the articles represent different areas of the field including those of current interest. Some of the contributions were taken from the symposium "Innovations in psychological humor research" which I organized for the Eighth International Humor Conference in Sheffield, England, in 1990. Other papers were invited to represent recent advances in the study of humor or of smiling.

The article by Mark Frank and Paul Ekman draws attention to recent advances in the research on the separation of different types of smiles and their assessment. There is only one type of smile which is associated with positive emotion, whereas others are not. Conceptually, this "enjoyment" smile can also be expected to accompany the affective state induced

by humor. However, facial muscles can also be voluntarily contracted, and individuals may smile to convince a person that they experience a positive affect although nothing much is felt or even strong negative emotions are present. Besides these phony and masking smiles, one also has to consider 17 other forms of smiles which are not faked but which also do not reflect enjoyment (Ekman 1985). It is evident that when more than one type of smile occurs in an experiment, each has to be treated separately. Frank and Ekman discuss the five markers which may help to separate the "enjoyment" smile from other types of smiles. This breakthrough in emotion research has clear-cut consequences for experimental humor research. For example, several research questions involve group testing, where subjects might smile without enjoying the humor just because the others present smile or laugh. Similarly, it has been demonstrated in a variety of studies that the presence of a laughing model can enhance the frequency of the subjects' smiling. It was not controlled, however, whether the laughter of the confederate of the experimenter facilitated the subjects' enjoyment smiles or caused the subjects to display other types of smiles not reflecting enjoyment. In my own studies I have found that even in solitary situations individuals display smiles (although quite infrequently) which do not indicate enjoyment of the humor presented.

All in all, experimental humor research would profit from adopting the recent advances made in emotion research. This includes not only the identification of different types of smiles and the markers which help to distinguish among them but also the progress made in the assessment of nonverbal behavior. Smiling is assessed with the help of facial EMG or anatomically based coding systems like the FACS (Ekman and Friesen 1978). On the other hand, humor research can contribute to the validation of the hypotheses outlined by Frank and Ekman.

The article by Mark Winkel represents a line of research which has a long tradition in the study of humor. In perhaps the first psychophysiological study of humor and laughter, Hecker (1873) observed pupil dilation during laughter induced by tickling as well as humor. He concluded that this reflects the increased sympathetic activity during laughter. In Winkel's experiment, pupil size is also measured along with electrodermal activity and heart rate. On the basis of these measures it is attempted to differentiate between the two stages of decoding humor and the subsequent appreciation. The physiological concomitants of the processing of

humor have been frequently neglected in prior psychophysiological studies of humor.

Lambert Deckers provides an overview of the research on the weight-judging paradigm (WJP), which, in its present form, was developed and popularized by him. Also included is a detailed description of the rationale of the WJP. Two experiments aimed at clarifying the nature of the emotional response elicited by the WJP are reported as well. The assumptions underlying the WJP — and other approaches of artificial humor — are that the core ingredients of humor do not necessarily have to be presented within traditional forms of humor, such as jokes or cartoons; they can be extracted and implemented in other vehicles, for example, in a psychophysical task of lifting weights. Here, incongruity can be generated by first having the subjects develop an expectation about heaviness of weights and then violating this expectation by a largely deviating weight. The merit of this approach is that the presumed key ingredients of humor can be manipulated experimentally. This is hardly possible with traditional forms of humor. The present article demonstrates how variables like the conditions necessary for incongruity, degree of incongruity, or stimulus intensity can be handled by the WJP.

The WJP has not reached its limit of applicability; there are other potential fields of application. Further validation of this model for humor could come from investigating developmental trends and individual differences. Do the responses elicited correlate with appreciation of traditional forms of humor or with the subjects' "sense of humor?" Do the responses vary as a function of the subjects' cheerful state, as with conventional humor? Are there developmental trends in the response to the WJP which parallel those of traditional humor? The WJP would gain further popularity if — as with traditional forms of humor — a variation of content could be implemented as well, for instance, by replacing the cylinders normally used by meaningful objects.

The article by Peter Derks and Sanjay Arora deals with the question of what happens when one kind of humor is presented in the context of another. The basic assumption is that the perceived funniness of a joke or a cartoon will differ as a function of what kind of humor was presented before in a sequence. Such an effect was found in a study by Goldstein, Suls, and Anthony (1972), who demonstrated that the repetition of a joke theme makes this theme salient and that subsequent jokes are found funnier when the same theme is continued rather than alternated. This

rationale is extended by also testing the effects of innocent vs. sexual themes and high vs. low quality humor.

Two experiments are reported which suggest, among others, that it might be possible to prime structural properties of humor, not only the content. This opens the possibility of formulating and testing several new hypotheses. As Derks and Arora point out, one could, for example, test whether the proposed distinction between incongruity-resolution and nonsense humor structures can be validated in such a priming experiment. I wonder whether it would make sense to raise the power of the tests by controlling the subjects' general appreciation of the type of humor employed in the experiment. A reduction of the variance due to different levels of humor appreciation (that is, the "error" variance) might allow the experiment to be conducted with fewer subjects. Furthermore, the repetition of humor or a particular type of humor might have contrasting effects for those who generally like or dislike this form humor. Finally, one has to consider that the negative effects of the repetition of disliked humor types might be reflected only in a rating scale with an explicit negative hedonic tone and that this aspect would go undetected by a scale assessing neutral to positive evaluation only. Thus, it might be of interest to have the subjects rate how "aversive" the joke is in addition to its degree of "funniness."

Ofra Nevo, Giora Keinan, and Mina Teshimovsky-Arditi review theory and research on the hypothesized relationship between humor and pain tolerance. The results of an experiment are reported in which the cold pressor test is used to induce pain: some of the subjects were shown a humorous film while holding their hand in cold water. The results suggest that a potential relationship is of a highly complex nature. First, it seems that the beneficial effects of humor on one's pain threshold depend on whether the film induces positive affect, whether it is perceived as humorous by the subject. It is frequently overlooked that the presentation of any form of humor will always lead to indifferent or even negative affective states in some subjects. For them no beneficial effects can be expected. This has to be taken into account more explicitly in the experimental design of future related studies. Second, the results suggest that it might be fruitful to include personality variables like the subject's "sense of humor" explicitly in the study because it might interact with the experimental treatment.

Rod Martin, Nicholas Kuiper, Joan Olinger, and Kathryn Dance provide an overview of their current research on the relationship between

humor, coping with stress, self-concept, and psychological well-being. Their research is based on a moderator variable approach which was pioneered in the field of humor by Martin and Lefcourt (1983). Basically, it is assumed that individuals differ habitually with respect to their "sense of humor," which is assessed with the help of questionnaires. They investigate whether the impact of environmental events on the individual depends on the level of the subject's sense of humor. Results demonstrate, for example, that individuals located on the high end of this continuum display less negative affect for negative life circumstances than individuals with low levels of humor.

The present article documents the theoretical and empirical development since the early studies and highlights the results of the respective studies. A major theoretical development is the change from the description of a static interaction between life events and sense of humor to the examination of potential processes by which high humor individuals appraise and cope with life events differently from those with less of a sense of humor. The major empirical development in their lab concerns findings suggesting that humor — in addition to buffering the effects of stress — might also play an important role in enhancing the enjoyment of positive life experiences and a more positive orientation towards the self. It appears that their results also provide support for the widespread assumption of a positive relationship between sense of humor and optimism.

The range of articles included in this special issue indicates the variety of ways in which psychologists study humor. The aim of this special issue is to provide some selected current research issues in psychological humor research. The articles here illustrate the potential for research on humor in psychology and may serve to stimulate other important investigations. Eysenck's evaluation of humor research as "one of the most difficult, as well as one of the most fascinating fields of psychological study" (1972: xvii) has not lost its validity.

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